

Excerpted from “Why Food Should be a Commons not a Commodity” by Jose Luis Vivero Pol posted on Shareable.org on October 9th, 2013.

A common resource versus a commodity

Food, a limited yet renewable resource that comes in both wild and cultivated forms, is essential for human existence. Over time, it has evolved from a local resource held in common into a private, transnational commodity. This process of commodification has involved the development of certain traits within food to fit the mechanized processes and regulations put in practice by the industrial food system, and it is also the latest stage in the objectification of food—a social phenomenon that has deprived food of all its non-economic attributes. As a result, the value of food is no longer based on the many dimensions that bring us security and health, including the fact that food is a:

- Basic human need and should be available to all
- Fundamental human right that should be guaranteed to every citizen
- Pillar of our culture for producers and consumers alike
- Natural, renewable resource that can be controlled by humans
- Marketable product subject to fair trade and sustainable production
- Global common good that should be enjoyed by all

This multidimensional view of food diverges from the mainstream industrial food system’s approach to food as a one-dimensional commodity. Even so, the industrial food system has yet to enclose, or to convert into private property, all aspects of our food commons, including:

- Traditional knowledge of agriculture that has been accumulated over thousands of years
- Modern, science-based agricultural knowledge accumulated within national institutions
- Cuisine, recipes, and national gastronomy
- Edible plants and animals created in the natural world (e.g., fish stocks and wild fruits)
- Genetic resources for food and agriculture
- Food safety considerations (e.g., Codex Alimentarius)
- Public nutrition, including hunger and obesity imbalances
- Extreme food price fluctuations in global and national markets

Our most basic human need, privatized

The industrial food system's enclosure of food through the privatization of seeds and land, legislation, excessive pricing, and patents, has played a large role in limiting our access to food as a public good. The system now feeds the majority of people living on the planet and has created a market of mass consumption where eaters become mere consumers. As such, the industrial food system's goal is to accumulate under-priced food resources while maximizing the profit of food enterprises, instead of ensuring food's most important non-economic qualities, such as nutrition. Many believe this has resulted in the failure of the global food system.

We can't rely on the market

Within the mainstream “no money no food” worldview, hunger still prevails in a world of abundance. Globally speaking, the industrial food system is increasingly failing to fulfill its basic goals of producing food in a sustainable manner, feeding people adequately, and avoiding hunger. The irony is that [half of those who grow 70% of the world's food go hungry today](#). Most believed that a market-led food system would finally lead to a healthier global population, yet none of the recent analyses of the connection between our global food system and hunger have questioned the privatization of food. As a result, most people believe food access to be the main problem of global hunger.

But reality proves otherwise. [Unregulated markets simply cannot provide the necessary quantity of food](#) for everyone—even if low-income groups were given the means to procure it. An industrial food system that views food as a commodity to be distributed according to market rules will never achieve food security for all. There won't be a market-driven panacea for our unsustainable and unjust food system; rather the solution will require experimentation at all levels—personal, local, national, and international—and diverse approaches to governance—market-led, state-led, and collective action-led. We need to bring unconventional and radical perspectives into the food transition debate to develop a different narrative for our food system.